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ABSTRACT

The letter format, whether on paper or on computers, fosters student collaboration and a virtual community. Letters have real audiences, even when those audiences are fictional, as in epistolary novels and imaginative writing assignments. Most adult, non-traditional students (such as those at Tidewater Community College in Virginia) know that letters are a significant communication tool in which attention must be paid to voice and audience. When personal, letters are expressive and intimate; when public, they demand clarity and accuracy for transmitting and recording information. Recent discussions on electronic lists, including W-center, Megabyte University, and the Alliance for Computers in Writing, illustrate the increasing adoption of electronic mail as a tool for communication and collaboration among students. Students write to specific individuals or to designated groups; however, unlike paper letters, which are likely to be read by only the writer and recipient, everything on the computer is truly public and accessible to everyone else. Letter writing is also viable in the literature class where students can write to fictional characters, to authors, to individual classmates, and to the teacher. A number of specific writing assignments developed for composition and literature instruction demonstrate the viability of this form of writing. Even in classes other than English, such as technical or science classes, writing letters is an effective form of learning. (TB)

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LETTER WRITING AND NEW LITERACIES FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

A PRESENTATION AT THE CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., MARCH 24, 1995

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Increasingly, I assign letters for student writing, both informal and formal. Letters focus students' attention on voice and audience in a conventional format that they take seriously because they already know the place of letters in the world outside the academy. Letters have real audiences, even when those audiences are fictional as in epistolary novels and imaginative writing assignments. As electronic mail, the letter format offers the added benefit of immediate publication and awareness of audience with every posting. For nontraditional students in a cosmopolitan but transient community like Virginia Beach with its large military population and for commuter students at a two-year community college like Tidewater Community College, the letter format, whether on paper or on computers, fosters necessary collaboration and a virtual community.

Most adult students know that letters are a significant communication tool in which attention must be paid to voice and

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audience. When personal, letters are expressive and intimate, when public, they demand clarity and accuracy for transmitting and recording information. Therefore, students accept the format as authentic and important. As James Britton wrote in *Record and Recall*, a letter is "a verbal incident within an ongoing event." The audience is real but absent. Absent, too, is the writer when the recipient reads, yet, Britton adds, "the reader conjures up the presence of the writer..." Although this "togetherness is feigned," its significance is not. For many classroom assignments, this feigned togetherness may seem more genuine than the traditional impersonal academic essay. With increasing access to electronic mail and the Internet, letter writing or message posting is extending this togetherness in ways undreamed of by most academics a decade ago; the very medium is revitalizing the epistolary art in ways that most students respond to favorably.

Letter Writing on Computers: Electronic Mail

Recent discussions on electronic lists, including W-Center, Megabyte University, and the Alliance for Computers in Writing, illustrate the increasing adoption of electronic mail as a tool for communication and collaboration among students. Students write to specific individuals or to designated groups; however, unlike paper letters, which are likely to be read only by the writer and recipient and selected others, everything on a computer network is truly public and accessible to anybody else with a computer and a modem.

On W-Center, October 29, 1993, for example, Joyce Hicks suggested that electronic mail might generate a renewal of "the lost art of letter writing." She asked whether "this return to the letter will

increase students' fluency with the written word and stress its importance." In response, Jeanne H. Simpson cited the ease of instant correspondence versus the logistics of letters, envelopes, and postage. Other respondents lauded the spontaneity, the informality, and even the constraints such as conciseness; as Barry Maid responded to Hicks," posts seem to be most effective when they only take up one screen."

Similar praise for electronic letters is reported on Megabyte University's list. For example, on January 19, 1994, David S. Hogsette described classroom exchanges on the Internet: "I think the students learn that knowledge is created out of discursive exchanges, and they can witness and follow this dynamic on the Internet." Electronic mail, he added, has improved communication with students who "are more willing to send me a message than they are to come to my office or to call me at home."

Another important feature noted by users of electronic mail in instruction is the empowerment of many traditional silent students. Disabled students unable to speak or hand write with facility can often use computer keyboards, mice, or trackballs. Students who are reticent by nature or who need more time to compose their thoughts than an oral class discussion allows find their voice. Gail E. Hawisher and Charles Moran in their October 1993 article in *College English*, "Electronic Mail and the Writing Instructor," refer to studies showing the willingness of shy and marginalized students to "speak" through electronic letters. Even as early as 1987, Joyce Kinkead recommended e-mail letters from students to their teachers as a valuable alternative for shy students who would not speak their

concerns directly ("Computer Conversations: E-Mail and Writing Instruction," *College Composition and Communication* 38.3 (October 1987):337-341).

Because my own and my students' experiences corroborate these findings, I use electronic mail and real-time conferencing messages whenever I have access to a computer facility.

Letter Writing in Literature Classes

In literature classes, letters invite students to enter the world of imaginative writing and thus better understand character, point of view, motivation, conflict, and style. Students who might be intimidated if asked to write a story or poem or play are able to write letters such as the following.

*to characters ("Dear J. Alfred Prufrock...." or "prufrockja@mermaid.hamlet.org")

*from characters "(Gentle Reader.....Sincerely, Emma")

*among characters ("Dear Dimmesdale,.....I remain, Hester")

*to authors ("Dear Kate Chopin, Calixta's behavior was shameless!")

*from authors ("Dear Student, Do your parents really bug you?.....Later, Franz")

*individual classmates ("Dear Classmate Why does the boy's mother permit to buy the gun in Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Was Almost a Man'?")

*to the whole class ("Dear Classmates, Did you think Alice Waythorn in Edith Wharton's 'The Other Two' was a gold digger, marrying a succession of men to improve her social and financial position?")

*to the teacher ("Dear Ms. Reiss, I was especially troubled by the 'kewpie doll' humiliation of the woman in 'Battle Royal' from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.")

Letter Writing for Composition and Literature Instruction: Sample Assignments

The following abstracts describe some specific letter writing assignments developed for writing and literature instruction. On request, I will send some more details and samples of student responses to these assignments.

*Final exam in course on research paper writing: Write a 500-word letter to a student who will be taking the course next term. In this letter, give suggestions for succeeding in the research project based on your own experience. Use you own strengths and weaknesses to guide you in providing this advice. Address the letter "Dear Future English 111 Student."

*Paired letter exchange in a literature course: *Part one*--Write a 50-plus-word letter to a classmate in which you ask a question about an element of a specific work about which you would like additional elaboration or explanation. *Part two*--Answer your classmate's question in a letter of at least 150 words. Be specific and clear so that your classmate will understand. *Part three*--Write a 50-plus-word thank you note to the person who answered your question, including thanks for specific explanation and information that were helpful and why.

*Definition discussion, English 111: This unannounced writing assignment for English 111 used electronic discussion groups for collaboration. *First*, each person in the group defines an assigned term (fire, wave, snack, park) and sends that definition to the rest of the group. *Next*, each person reads all the definitions of that term

and writes a synthesis of similarities and differences in the various definitions along with a comment on the significance of the group's common and contrasting understandings of the term. *Then* students gather with others in their group, compare responses, and write a group synthesis which they post to the class.

*Poetry explication: *First*, each student selects and explicates an image from a poem the class has read and e-mails the 100-word analysis to the entire class. *Second*, students read their classmates' postings, find one they feel strongly about, and respond to it by writing a letter to the student whose explication impressed them and sending a copy to me.

*Literacy research project: *First*, students collaborate for discussion and writing on a common topic. *Second*, they use electronic mail to send their collaborative writings to the whole class, giving the whole class additional sources of information for their research papers. *Third*, students are required to cite at least one of their classmates' postings in their own final research papers.

Letter Writing Across the Curriculum

Students can write letters to each other, to the teacher, to administrators, and to people and publications in the community. When paired or otherwise grouped, students can respond to each other, whether reviewing drafts of papers in progress or discussing issues sociology or physics. Using a letter instead of a form for peer

editing personalizes the messages and makes them a conversation rather than exercise.

Across the curriculum, letters can engage students in course content in meaningful ways. For example, in technical classes, letters can professionalize students and lead them to assess essential skills when students write recommendations for themselves or their classmates to prospective employers. Letters fuse imagination and information when a geology teacher asks students to project themselves to a past era and write a letter to a person in the present explaining what the land is like from the perspective of that other time and place. Letters can make history come alive, students adopted what they considered the language of the period and took the administrative responsibility seriously. Unlike formal academic essays on these same subjects, letters require students to have a personal stake in the subject, to adopt an appropriate voice, and to address a defined audience.